

Forget about calling it 'Irangate'; the times and cases are different

By Nicholas M. Horrock

WASHINGTON—Ronald Reagan will not be appearing in a rerun of Watergate.

The allusions to Irangate, Northgate or Reagagate, the notion of a 794-day national trauma leading to the abdication of an American president, are unfair to Reagan, to the nation and to an understanding of what really is happening in Washington.

The cases are different. The act that sparked Watergate was a common burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters by men working for the President of the United States.

Richard M. Nixon was running for re-election and the burglary was carried out for partisan political purposes, not issues of the national security of the United States. Nixon said he didn't know about the burglary in advance, and it soon became clear that the White House was doing everything to stymie the investigation.

All sorts of claims and counterclaims flowed from that burglary, but the core never disappeared: A domestic crime had been committed for the personal advantage of the president and an intricate web of lies and obstructions were woven to hide it.

Now men who work for President Reagan have been accused of taking the profits from secret shipments of U.S.-made arms to Iran and directing

the money to support a covert war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Reagan says he didn't know about it and has ordered a criminal investigation of the actions of his White House aides and sweeping review of how the National Security Council carries out its role.

The contra war was been supported by Congress, albeit through secret committee approval, from 1982 until 1984 and was again underwritten by Congress last summer. At this juncture, the actions under investigation seem to be in pursuit of an effort to keep that war alive until congressional support again could be secured.

The times, too, are different. Watergate broke as the nation swam in sea of doubt and despair. The Vietnam War was drawing to its sad finale. The rancor in its path left distrust of many of the nation's institutions, not the least of which was the presidency. Three national leaders, including a president, had been assassinated in the previous decade. Fear and suspicion stalked the land.

Now, 15 years later, there is no thirst in Washington to return to a time when an American president was held up to ridicule on nightly television. Even some of Reagan's sharpest critics, such as Sen. Sam Nunn [D., Ga.], are cautious about how far to carry the Iran case.

Part of their caution may be simple prudence: Ronald Reagan is a popular and respected president and Israel, the helpmate in the Iran case, a potent

political force on Capitol Hill.

But part of the caution is the sense among members of Congress that the American people don't want Ronald Reagan and the

presidency trashed. One veteran congressional aide, who was a key Watergate investigator, argues that they "want things fixed and they don't want everything to be destroyed trying to fix it."

What really is involved here is a battle over whether a democracy can fight a Cold War and maintain the institutions of freedom.

It is a continuation of the debate joined at another set of congressional hearings in the 1970s during the investigation of the

activities of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Those inquiries found national security agencies, swollen to enormous size, rambling through the world with such ill-conceived operations as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the exploding cigar caper thought up as a way to kill Cuba's Fidel Castro. The plans and their execution often were carried out in such secrecy and under such hidden lines of authority that even the men who authorized them didn't know whether the operations were useful or wise.

It was hard to draw the line between foreign operations and those at home. Programs to burglarize the homes of foreign agents for intelligence information had segued into burglarizing the homes of Americans with

unpopular political views.

Murder of foreign leaders became the subject of routine planning in intelligence agencies and undeclared wars—for which the support of the American people neither had been sought nor received—were engaged in without restraint.

Reacting to public outcry, Congress imposed restraints. But the espionage agents and covert operators never have ceased their efforts to be free of those bonds.

Ronald Reagan entered office convinced that American undercover operators must be freed. He picked William Casey, a New York lawyer with a buccaneer's career on Wall Street and a tour in the CIA's precursor, the Office of Strategic Services, to head the intelligence agency.

By 1984, the CIA was feeding arms to Afghan rebels, secretly

sending money to Angolan guerrillas, backing insurgents in Ethiopia, bucking up Moammar Gadhafi's enemies in Chad, mining

harbors in Nicaragua and helping anti-Vietnamese forces in Cambodia.

But Congress was anxious. Even those who supported the orthodoxy of maintaining a strong line against the Soviets around the world—men such as Sen. Barry Goldwater [R., Ariz.]—were critical of the ability of the CIA and the wisdom of many of its plans.

More and more of the planning for secret operations was drawn into the realm of the National Security Council at the White House, where congressional oversight and reluctant bureaucrats could not follow. Few in Washington know how far this has

gone, what operations are afoot, what techniques were used or what laws were broken.

The outcome may mar the record of Reagan's extraordinary presidency, but it is unlikely to drive him from the White House before his term is ended. It is equally unlikely to permanently mar the respect and affection he has won from many Americans.

Reagan may come to doubt the value of covert operations and a foreign policy conducted by espionage agents. The President already may see the pitfalls in that. If he is correct that he was never told about using proceeds from Iranian arms sales to supply Nicaraguan contras, then he may recognize that obscure men operating without his authority can destroy his administration and

damage the nation.

He may discover that when vast amounts of money and material are moved without clear agreement within the government and without judicious planning, the money may be stolen and the material misdirected. He may learn that many in government may not be motivated by the same patriotism that motivates him, and that when allowed to operate outside the law they can run amuck.

The outcome of this new Washington theater piece may include criminal indictments, show hearings and new espionage tales. But what really is in question is whether it will result in new restraint on a president's power to operate without the knowledge or support of the Congress and the American people.

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